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Compendium of basic United Nations terminology in governance and public administration

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Preliminary report by the Working Group

Summary

At its fifth session in April 2006, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration decided to establish a working group on basic United Nations terminology in governance and public administration.[1] The present document is a preliminary report produced by the Working Group. It proposes options for developing a glossary of basic terminology, its nature, structure and content, and provides an annex containing some of the terms to be included. To assist the Committee in choosing among the options, the Working Group is continuing to draft prototype definitions for selected terms to illustrate the potential end products for the glossary.

* E/C.16/2007/1.

[1] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 24* (E/2006/44).

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I. Introduction

1. At its fifth session, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration decided to establish a working group on basic United Nations terminology in governance and public administration.

2. The scope and focus of the terms to be covered by the Working Group are still under discussion, pending the Committee's decision whether the scope should include the terminology used in all United Nations documents related to governance and public administration or only Secretariat documents.

3. The Working Group is composed of the following Committee members: Mario P. Chiti; Peter Anyang' Nyong'o; Taher H. Kanaan; Pan Suk Kim; Anthony Makrydemetres; Joao Paulo Peixoto; Siripurapu Kesava Rao; Prijono Tjiptoherijanto; Werner Jann; Claudia S. Passador; and Joao L. Passador. Mr. Chiti is acting as Coordinator of the Working Group.

4. The Working Group's mandate is to prepare a "compendium" (or preferably a "glossary"; the exact term still needs further discussion) of the basic terminology used in the United Nations, to be presented and approved at the sixth session of the Committee. A technical publication containing the glossary will be subsequently issued by the Secretariat.

II. Character and scope of the glossary and phasing of work

5. To date, three phases of the exercise have been planned: (a) the elaboration of a methodological preliminary report for the sixth session of the Committee; (b) a general discussion of the preliminary report at that session and, upon adoption, the planning of future steps; and (c) the finalization of the glossary within the mandate of the Committee.

6. The character and scope of the glossary the Working Group is proposing are based on the objectives outlined below.

7. The glossary would be included in a United Nations publication, of a non-binding legal nature, aimed at providing the Member States and all other interested parties with a common definition of the basic terms and concepts used in United Nations documents on governance and public administration. There are two uses for such a glossary: to improve the clarity of the intergovernmental deliberations of the United Nations itself; and to assist Member States to better implement United Nations resolutions.

8. Regarding the intergovernmental deliberations of United Nations bodies, at the present time no such glossary exists. It is the Working Group's understanding that United Nations documents and resolutions do not consistently include a definition of the key terms used, as is usually done, for example, by the European Union. Such a lack of consistency could lead to many of the terms being used with different meanings, which could in turn lead to different legal and conceptual interpretations.

9. Regarding the implementation of United Nations collective decisions on governance and public administration, in the absence of a common official terminology each Member State is free to interpret United Nations decisions according to its own general principles or its "administrative culture".

10. An official glossary prepared by the United Nations would have two positive effects: it would ensure clearer discussions on governance and public administration by Member States and more consistent follow-up actions by United Nations offices; and it would promote more uniformity in the implementation of United Nations resolutions by Member States. The objectives that the Committee set out for its Working Group at its fifth session in 2006 are, therefore, particularly ambitious.

11. A deeper analysis of the possible forms such a glossary could take brings up other interesting possibilities. For instance, such a document should not only represent a mere consolidation of the terms most commonly used in United Nations documents (a relevant outcome, in any case) but also aim at forging a common understanding of administrative cultures, encompassing both public policies and administrative practices.

III. Utility and application of the glossary

12. The glossary could substantially contribute to a better global understanding of the governance and administrative concepts and experiences of Member States. Different interpretations from State to State have sometimes been a source of institutional tension. However, the present initiative should not be seen as an attempt to homogenize administrative cultures, which would lead to the loss of the diversity of national cultures and of their specific, rich historical traditions, but rather as an effort to better understand them. The specific connection of public administration terms to the administrative cultures of the language utilized should be taken into account.

13. The uniform application of international decisions, as reflected in international documents, is a relevant factor for improving the quality of administrative performance, mostly in "young" States. Additionally, a common approach would improve the exchange of best practices, the mutual understanding of principles and concepts on public administration, the cross-fertilization of ideas among national legal orders and more effective relations of Member States with the United Nations and other international organizations. In sum, the glossary would be an important instrument in achieving a common approach to public administration issues, as supported in recent United Nations declarations and plans of action such as the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Moreover, the glossary would be a major tool for developing a shared understanding and the perspective of participatory governance — a concept identified by the Committee and by the Economic and Social Council at the core of its governance and public administration initiatives.

14. The usefulness of such an initiative is confirmed by the recent experience of regional organizations, such as the European Union. The European Union has a supranational character because of the strong integration among its Member States and the commonality of their institutions.

15. In the European framework, the recent treaty establishing a constitution for Europe provided that effective implementation of European Union law by the Member States, which is essential for the proper functioning of the Union, should be regarded as a matter of common interest. This is one of the areas in which the European Union can take a coordinating, complementary or supporting role towards its Member States. The effective implementation regarding public administrations,

as "a matter of common interest", implies the sharing of concepts, procedural and organizational rules, as well as of goals.

16. A European glossary could be very useful even in the context of the new approach of the European Union to matters of common interest, based on the Open Method of Coordination, approved by the European Council at the 2000 Lisbon summit. The Method is a new form of coordination on national policies, involving Member States, triggered at their own initiative or at that of the Commission. The issues are defined collectively, accounting for national and regional diversities. The objectives and indicators are identified in a specific area on the basis of national reports, allowing Member States to improve their knowledge, to develop exchanges of information, views, expertise and practices, and to promote, further to agreed-upon objectives, innovative approaches that could possibly lead to guidelines or recommendations. Therefore, a public administration glossary could help in the implementation of those ideas.

IV. Process for proposing terms for inclusion in the glossary

17. After the fifth session of the Committee, the Coordinator of the Working Group received contributions and suggestions by members of the Committee. The list of the suggested terms is contained in the annex. The list is derived from the professional knowledge of the Working Group members, and it reflects their particular experience in the social sciences. In the month prior to the next meeting of the Committee, the members of the Working Group will be asked to indicate new terms. A finalized list to be presented at the forthcoming session of the Committee will be as comprehensive as possible and serve as a basis for subsequent work. The list will, at a later stage, be checked against the list of terms commonly used in official documents and resolutions.

18. According to the plan, the Committee would have an ample list of terms on governance and public administration by the end of 2007, arrived at through the contribution of the Working Group members (and of the Committee itself, at its sixth session) and of Secretariat staff. Such a list of terms will be the basis of the Working Group proceedings in the following year, to be discussed at the seventh session of the Committee.

V. Alternative models of the glossary

19. For each term a file card will be provided, composed of at least a definition and appropriate links. A crucial issue for the Committee to consider is the format of the file card, for which there are three main models, as described below.

20. Model A is a shortened definition, with links to other terms and a concise body of reference acts and materials. It has the value of simplicity, would be easy to consult and would not require any particular professional background for understanding and implementation. The concise definition of the terms could be modelled on the normative criterion used by important jurisdictions and the European Union.

21. Model B provides a wider file card, which obviously would include parts of model A. It would be enriched with appropriate references for in-depth analyses,

such as to culture (encyclopaedias of social science, leading textbooks and monographs, websites, etc.), normative decisions of international organizations, some national legislation, and jurisprudence (if any). The value of B is to give a chance to any institution and professionals concerned to improve their knowledge. Furthermore, the additional part of the file card would not be an essential element of the document. It could be left aside if not relevant, either on that specific occasion or as a rule. A limit of model B is that, due to the articulated presentation of the file card, it might favour a "personalized" interpretation, jeopardizing the uniformity of definition of the terms considered (the primary objective of the glossary).

22. In model C, the official glossary approved by the Committee would be composed only of a concise file, as in the case of model A. But, for all the parties interested and for the general public, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs would put all the possible reference cases and materials on its website; in that way, only the most conscientious national public administrations would make use of this "cultural" part. Model C is supported by the Coordinator.

23. The choice of the glossary model depends also on an agreement on the terms to be defined. Experts on social sciences may easily turn out a large list of concepts, as was demonstrated during the Working Group's first proceedings. However, the definition of such terms and concepts is much more controversial, for three main reasons: (a) the difficulty or impossibility of defining in a general way terms widely used in the English language; (b) the differences in the meaning of the same term in various orders, determined by the specific form of Government of each country; (c) the different juridical disciplines that the legal orders have provided for similar issues.

24. A good example of the first case is the term "accountability", which administrative sciences use to refer to the responsibility of high-level civil servants, as distinct from "policy responsiveness" of politicians. However, in a non-specialized sense, the term "accountability" is synonymous with "responsibility", only clearly different from "legal liability". Should the glossary endorse a "technical" notion (which, in reality, is shared only by administrative scientists), or would it be preferable to accept the general notion (more accepted by all)?

25. An example of the second case is the term "devolution". Unlike "accountability", there is more consensus about "devolution", which refers to the transfer of political and administrative powers from the "centre" (the central State, or simply the State) to locally elected bodies, with a representative nature, which will subsequently act in an autonomous way. The problem is that the term assumes a significantly different scope in the legal orders where it finds application, due to the different institutional models: devolution in a unitary country, such as the United Kingdom, does not correspond to devolution in a "regional State", such as Spain or Italy, nor does it correspond to the devolution possible in a federal State, such as Canada or Germany. In the light of such diversity of context, which gives various meanings to the same term, the problem arises in defining "devolution" in various ways, according to the institutional models.

26. A good example of the third case is that of "independent administrative authorities". The term has been largely used in the last 20 years with reference to a new kind of public body, considered a legal entity mandated to meet the problems raised by the transformations of the State (such as privatization or moving from public ownership to regulation). At its core, the concept is perceived everywhere in

a similar way. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many public bodies outside the State were established to meet the challenges of "social administration". However, while on the one hand, the difficulty applicable to the second case also exists (that of significant differences of institutional contexts), on the other, its definition differs according to the legal regimes under which the bodies operate. The point is easily illustrated by a comparison between the American and French disciplines and their respective internal regimes. Given such complexity, should the glossary be limited to a general definition that might be superficially good for all countries but not adequate in depth for any of them?

VI. Other considerations

27. Having chosen the glossary type, the other problems are only minor: the composition of the Working Group; the language/languages to be used; the static or open character of the text; the opportunity for review by external experts and specialized institutions (such as the International Institute of Administrative Sciences) prior to the official presentation of the glossary.

28. Whether or not the Committee approves the proposals and, consequently, defines an ultimate working plan, the Working Group must be equipped in a more appropriate way. The composition should include all the necessary expertise (for example, lawyers, economists and social scientists). However, the Working Group could comprise the full membership of the Committee or just be a subgroup reporting to it. Furthermore, it would be important to provide the permanent support of a secretariat, useful both for Working Group proceedings and relations with the Secretariat and any other relevant United Nations bodies.

29. As regards linguistic challenges, obviously the glossary would be published in the official languages of the United Nations which would require the translation from English of the preparatory document, with the usual linguistic problems of translation for United Nations documents, exacerbated by the nature of the glossary. In many instances, there are no appropriate equivalents (the case is not only of a formal nature). Most of the references, documents, cases and material are derived from sources from English-speaking countries. Finally, the text must be linguistically simple in order to enhance understanding, and, subsequently, its uniform implementation.

30. The glossary should, in the opinion of the Working Group, be an open text, subject to periodical revisions and enlargements, and to the permanent review of its content in the evolving political and institutional settings. The open and "in progress" character of the glossary suggests that the functions of the Working Group could in the future be transferred to the Secretariat, which would then report regularly to the Committee.

31. Finally, given the innovative nature of the glossary (a text without precedent in international organizations, excluding some early efforts by the Council of Europe), the Working Group considers that a review of the text, with the help of external experts and specialized international institutes, such as the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, would be appropriate. In the same spirit, it proposes a periodical review on the new entries to the glossary.

32. As a further development, the creation of a network composed of national centres with the role of proposing and debating is recommended. Such a network would be a global forum on governance and public administration, giving substance to the idea of participatory governance.

VII. Conclusion and recommendations

33. To conclude, the Working Group is presenting a number of problematic issues and not necessarily conclusive solutions involved in the work. However, as stated above, the decision by the Committee to prepare a glossary on governance and public administration is without precedent in Member States and international organizations. That fact justifies an in-depth discussion at the next Committee meeting. The distinctive membership of the Committee guarantees a sound final decision.

34. The Working Group invites the members of the Committee to focus their discussions on: (a) enlarging the Working Group to include non-Committee members and widen the scope of the substantive disciplines and knowledge; (b) determining the nature of the glossary (i.e., whether to use model A, B, or C); (c) the languages in which the glossary would be published; (d) how to undertake periodic reviews of the glossary; (e) creating a network composed of national centres with the role of proposing and debating governance and public administration issues, including terminology; (f) determining which terms should be included in the glossary; and (g) outlining an action plan for the Working Group.

Annex

Proposed list of terms to be defined

Administrative reform
Affirmative action
Agencification
Agenda setting and policy formation
Arbitration
Balanced score card
Benchmarking
Best practice
Black economy
Capture theory
Centralization
Change management
Citizen participation
Civil service reform vs. public service reform
Civil service vs. public service
Civil society
Co-governance
Competency
Competency assessment
Competency framework
Competition law
Competitive government
Competitiveness
Conflict resolution
Corporate governance
Customer-oriented/driven government
Decentralization
Decentralization (political, administrative and financial)
Democracy
Deregulation
Developing countries
Devolution
Digital divide
Discrimination
Diversity
Diversity management
Downsizing
Economic exploitation
Ecosystem
E-government readiness
Electronic governance (e-governance)
Electronic government
Empowerment
Entitlement
Ethics
Executive agency
External economies and diseconomies

Federalism
Fiscal deficit
Gender
Gender budget
Gender budgeting
Gender equality
Global governance
Globalization
Global/world competitiveness
Good governance
Governance
Governance (administrative)
Governance and public administration
Government reform
Human capital
Human resources development
Human resources management vs. personnel management
Impasse
Inflation and deflation
Information society
Innovation
Intellectual property rights
Intergovernmental relations
International financial relations
International financial system
Keynesianism
Knowledge-based society
Knowledge divide
Learning organization
Lifelong learning
Local autonomy
Local governance
Log-rolling
Management reform
Managerialism
Mentoring
Mercantilism
Mobile government
Multiculturalism
New governance
New public management
Non-governmental organizations
Non-profit organization
Outcomes-oriented budgeting
Paradigms: administrative (public law) vs. entrepreneurial
Participation
Performance agreement
Performance charter/pledge
Performance indicator
Performance management

Performance measurement
Performance-related pay
Policy analysis
Policy evaluation
Policy implementation
Policy marketing
Political marketing
Progressive taxation
Property rights
Public administration
Public body
Public customer relationship management
Public enterprise or corporation
Public integrity
Public management
Public policy
Public-private partnership
Public-private sector partnerships
Public relations
Public sector
Public sector reform
Public union
Public values
Public virtue
QUANGO or non-departmental public body
Reengineering
Regional governance
Regulation
Regulatory reform
Reinventing government
Responsive governance
Restructuring
Result-oriented/driven government
Right to work
Rule of law
Sexual harassment
State-owned enterprise
Strategic human resources management
Structural unemployment
Subsidiarity
Sustainability
Sustainable development
Trade discrimination
Transparency
Virtual State
Wage subsidy
Welfare State